Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 02 January 2001 18:00

If you're a member of a young rock-and-roll band, that first show supporting somebody big can be nerve-wracking. So imagine being Miles and Daxx Nielsen of Harmony Riley on January 12, opening for the first time with Cheap Trick and … dad? Yes, Cheap Trick guitarist Rick Nielsen's two sons will be setting the table for him on eight East Coast dates in January. "We can't be bad," said drummer Daxx Nielsen, whose band will be playing RIBCO on January 5. "We can't suck."

That's the kind of confident fear we like to hear.

Harmony Riley has finally come around to its roots. The band spent most of its short life avoiding the Cheap Trick monster, never mentioning the blood ties and certainly never touring together. "We've never wanted to do it until now, and they've never really wanted us to," Daxx said.

Being performing children of famous musicians cannot be easy. You can either run like hell and deny that it had any role in your formation, or you can embrace it and get nailed for cashing in. Acknowledging one's background also makes it difficult for listeners to come in with open minds.

Part of the problem for Daxx and singer-guitarist Miles Nielsen (both of whom are in their early 20s) was that their Rockford, Illinois-based band wasn't quite right at first. The group's first record, 1999's Time, was a polished, easy slice of pop rock, loaded with Daxx's dense drumming and percussion. "It was pretty bouncy," he said, "and that wasn't what we were going for. We didn't want to be a jam band." Comparisons to the Dave Matthews Band were unwelcome. "It really didn't sound like we wanted it to," Daxx continued. "We really kind of rushed through it."

After losing two band members, the brothers gave the band a fresh start and recorded a four-song demo. "The atmosphere was a lot better with the band," Daxx said. The sound was harder, more in the rock vein than roots.

Rather than planning a full-length album, the band is getting ready to record another EP in Florida later this month. The short-form record accomplishes a number of goals: The band can concentrate on its songwriting, the disc is an easier sell with record labels, and it's cheaper for fans to buy at shows. "We've got a couple really finished songs" ready for the new demo, Daxx said.

But Harmony Riley isn't a band easily pleased. Daxx said that the band wants to improve as songwriters and players, and added that he and Miles would be getting an education from their old man over the coming month. So after a few years avoiding its past, Harmony Riley has finally decided to learn from it.